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Pronunciation Proficiency Level and Problematic Areas of Tertiary Level Students-Learners of English as a Foreign Language from Gotse Delchev University Shtip- Macedonia

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Abstract

Speech by itself is a verbalization of previously acquired knowledge and it is a step forward in foreign language learning, which allows noticing the progress on ourselves or others involved in foreign language learning. Considering definition of pronunciation thoroughly through phonetics lenses, it is described as a capability to use the correct forms of sound units within a word or utterance, considering their exact characteristics along with the exactness in regard of stress, rhythm, and intonation all as part of a spoken language. The aims of this research are to provide and depict the current condition, identifying proficiency level and problematic areas of pronunciation of targeted groups among university students, i.e. 119 participants of two different academic majors. The testing itself was done in duration of one academic class- 45 minutes and the participants have completed the questionnaire completely individually and without assistance of instructors.

Keywords: EFL; foreign language learners; pronunciation; proficiency; university students.

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1. Introduction

Speech by itself is a verbalization of previously acquired knowledge and it is a step forward in foreign language learning, which allows noticing the progress on ourselves or others involved in foreign language learning. Speech is the ability of an individual to bring convenience and establish communication with the connecting world through their verbal knowledge.

When a person claims to “know” a language, it is more likely to refer to it as for knowledge of certain amount of words, or sounds which might or might not encompass meaning. It is important to bear in mind that pronouncing a word and knowing its meaning has no relation one to each other. Nevertheless, a person may know a language which does not include that he/she is able or willing to speak it.

Pronunciation as a main component of the speech in its general notion is defined not in many words but from different viewpoints. Definitions that one may come across instantly are the following:

1. The act or manner of pronouncing words; utterance of speech.
2. A way of speaking a word, especially a way that is accepted or generally understood.
3. A graphic representation of the way a word is spoken, using phonetic symbols.

1.1. Pronunciation and the speech development

Thus as of a very basic aspect, pronunciation is the oral ability to produce certain sounds, in a group or in isolation that develops into production of meaningful or meaningless utterances creating and producing words that are unified in a speech and language.

Considering definition of pronunciation thoroughly through phonetics lenses, it is described as a capability to use the correct forms of stress, rhythm, and intonation of a word in a spoken language, or moreover as a capability to use the correct forms of sound units within a word or utterance, considering their exact characteristics along with the exactness in regard of stress, rhythm, and intonation all as part of a spoken language.

Further on, once a word is produced it is a tool exploited in a variety of manners. In terms of mother tongue, pronunciation varies equally as the spoken language varies. It is versatile condition simply because language is spoken by various individuals or groups, depending on many factors such as: the area in which speakers grew up, the area in which they now live, ethnicity, social status and class or education level.

As stated in the Common European Framework of Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment [1:116], Phonological competence involves knowledge of and skills in perception and production of:

- the sound-units (phonemes) of the language and their realization in particular contexts (allophones);

- the phonetic features which distinguish phonemes (distinctive features, e.g. voicing, rounding, nasality, plosion);
- the phonetic composition of words (syllable structure, the sequence of phonemes, word stress, word tones);
- sentence phonetics (prosody)
- sentence stress and rhythm
- intonation;
- phonetic reduction
- vowel reduction
- strong and weak forms
- assimilation
- elision.

According to Stefanova [2: 92] pronunciation is one of the main prerequisites for successful speech communication and to achieve this goal the learners need to have or develop own habits of pronunciation, i.e. to learn to pronounce the foreign sounds, especially those that are difficult and different from their native language.

According to Dalton and Seidlhofer [3] there are two ways to characterize the pronunciation as a production of meaningful sounds:

First, the sound is important because it is used as part of a language code. Therefore distinctive sounds of English, French, Thai and other languages are included. In this sense, it refers to the pronunciation as production and repetition of the sounds of speech.

Second, the sound is important because it is used to achieve significance in the context of its use. Here the code is combined with other factors in order to make the communication feasible. Therefore the pronunciation is considered as an act of speaking [3: 3].

Tench [4:1] claims that "Pronunciation is not an optional extra for the language learner, any more than grammar, vocabulary or any other aspect of language is. If a learner's general aim is to talk intelligibly to others in another language, a reasonable pronunciation is important".

Wong [5] singles out that even when the non-native speakers' vocabulary and grammar are excellent, if their

pronunciation falls below a certain threshold level they are unable to communicate efficiently and effectively.

As of Abbas Pourhosein Gilakjani [6:1] “learners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. Such learners may avoid speaking in English, and experience social isolation, employment difficulties and limited opportunities for further study. We judge people by the way they speak, and so learners with poor pronunciation may be judged as incompetent, uneducated or lacking in knowledge. Yet many learners find pronunciation one of the most difficult aspects of English to acquire, and need explicit help from the teacher. Therefore, some sort of pronunciation instruction in class is necessary”.

In 2010 A. Kirkova-Naskova [7] published an article which shows the analysis made by web application on 17 students of English Philology at the University "St. Cyril and Methodius" Skopje, Macedonia, on the characteristics of their pronunciation in English. The study was evaluating the level of "accented speech" starting from "no foreign accent" to "very heavy accent". Kirkova-Naskova [7:181] states that “It seems that the globalization of the English language may have caused a shift in native speaker attitudes towards pronunciation deviating from norm. Not all mispronunciations, then, are perceived by native speakers as being equally detrimental. Rather, the greatest intolerance on the part of native speakers is demonstrated with regard to pronunciation errors that impede communication and cause unintelligibility”.

The aforementioned and along with the ongoing classroom practice in the English Language Teaching in Macedonia and the knowledge acquired regarding the difficulties that our learners face while acquiring the desired level of English as a foreign language – the speech and the proper pronunciation particularly, was the reason to examine the current condition and test the university students in order to get a better view over the issues that pronunciation teachers need to work on.

2. Aims and object of the research

The aims of the research are to provide and depict the current condition, identifying proficiency level and problematic areas of pronunciation of targeted groups among University students. As for the methods, the author used a questionnaire consisted of 7 questions each required either yes/no question or detailed description.

Object of research:

As for the research, the targeted groups of students were 2 groups from the same university but different faculties, such as students of:

- a. Tourism and Business Logistics. The precondition for eligibility of this research was a passed exam of Business English Language course 1 and 2- in their first two semesters.
- b. Faculty of Philology (Majoring in English Language and Literature). The precondition for eligibility for this research was a passed English Phonetics course in the first semester.

All candidates have participated voluntarily. The number of participants was 119 of each and the testing itself was done in duration of one academic class- 45 minutes. They have completed the questionnaire completely individually and without assistance of instructors.

3. Materials and methods

As for the research the author of this study provided a personally created questionnaire that was consisted of 7 yes/ no questions. A detailed description in each question regarding the difference of two examples of words (if possible) was desirable and was additionally calculated and analyzed in the overall results. The questionnaire was consisted of 7 questions regarding identifying minimal pairs of consonants (devoiced vs voiced), vowels, and accent shifting in functional words (verbs vs adjectives and verbs vs nouns). In the first and the second question the participants were required to determine the differences between consonants i.e. the /ð/ and /d/ and the differences between /ts/ and /dz/ in a minimal pairs of words. The third and the fourth question referred to the differences among vowels particularly their duration i.e. long and short vowels, therefore the third one was a question to differ short and long I (/i:/ & /I/) and the fourth one was to differ the short and long U, (/u:/ & /U/) both given in examples of minimal pairs of words. In the fifth question it was required to determine the difference between the voiceless- devoiced consonants /θ/ and /t/, in a minimal pairs of words. The sixth question was to find the difference in a word given in its equal form in two separate sentences but used differently i.e. as a noun and as an adjective which differ in their stress. The last- seventh question referred to determine usage of the consonant “S” provided in spelling and the shifting as devoiced /s/ and as voiced variant /z/ in minimal pairs of words.

The conducted survey was limited to the following:

The survey has been performed for two separate groups of students only, with fully different academic majors, exclusively from the University of Gotse Delchev- Shtip; solely conducted to students that have acquired B1 proficiency level in English language, and to participants who have been in contact with English as a foreign language only during their secondary education, and not resided abroad for work, study etc.

4. Results

4.1. Identification of problematic areas

As of the questionnaire the identification of pronunciation defects of the areas that were easily noticeable could be downsized to the following:

-Poor production of [th] (as voiced and unvoiced)

-poor production of [ts] (and the discrepancy if it appears as [dz] or [ts])

Poor differentiating of long [i:] and short [I]

-poor differentiating of long and short u (they mispronounce wood- they use long u because of the double oo in spelling)

-equalizing theta [θ] with [t]

-No differentiating word stress shifting between nouns and verbs (stress is equalized)

-poor differentiating of [s] and [z]

The tables below presents the results from the examined candidates that have answered with YES/NO and N/A-blank. Additionally, the data from the candidates that have provided full correct explanation of differences and those just noticing differences without explanation are presented as well.

4.2. Faculty of Philology

Table 1

| | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 | Question 4 | Question 5 | Question 6 | Question 7 | Total amount of answered |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| Total amount of correct answers | 98 | 95 | 107 | 109 | 93 | 71 | 81 | 654 |
| Total amount of answered | 115 | 113 | 116 | 114 | 112 | 100 | 103 | 773 |
| correct answers expressed in percentages | 85, 2,% | 84,07% | 92,24% | 95,61% | 83,03% | 71% | 79% | 84% |

As of the tables above it is described how many of the participants have provided true and false answer without providing further explanation of the given task i.e. description of differences in sounds/ phonemes in the word examples. Out of the correct answers (given with “YES, THERE IS A DIFFERENCE”) here are the results that appear with full explanation.

Results from the questionnaire of the Faculty of Philology given in details:

Question 1: as of 98 participants with correct answer 47 or 47, 96% have provided a correct and full explanation and 51 participants or 52, 04% have given an incorrect explanation.

Question 2: Every participant had given only a positive answer but did not provide explanation

Question 3: 12 out of 107 participants had provided an incorrect explanation which is 11, 21% and 95 participants or 88, 79% had provided a correct explanation

Question 4: Every participant had given only a positive answer but did not provide explanation

Question 5: 2 participants out of 93 which is 2, 15% have provided a correct explanation and 91 or 87, 85% have given only a short answer without explanation.

Question 6: 2 participants out of 71 which is 2, 82% have provided a correct explanation and 69 or 87, 08% have provided only short answer but not a full explanation.

Question 7: 2 participants out of 81 which is 2, 47% have provided a correct explanation and 79 or 87, 53% have provided only a short correct answer without full explanation.

4.3 Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics

Table 2

| | Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 | Question 4 | Question 5 | Question 6 | Question 7 | Total amount of answered |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Total amount of correct answers | 15 | 10 | 12 | 11 | 11 | 8 | 2 | 69 |
| Total amount of answered | 114 | 115 | 111 | 113 | 107 | 96 | 112 | 768 |
| correct answers expressed in percentages | 13% | 9% | 11% | 10% | 10% | 8% | 2% | 9% |

As of the tables above it is described how many of the participants have provided true and false answer without providing further explanation of the given task i.e. description of differences in sounds/ phonemes in the word examples. Out of the correct answers (given with “YES, THERE IS A DIFFERENCE”) here are the results that appear with full explanation.

Results from the questionnaire of the Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics given in details:

Question 1: as of 15 participants with correct answer 1 or 6, 67% have provided a correct and full explanation and 14 participants or 93, 33% have given an incorrect explanation.

The rest of the questions (2, 3,4,5,6 and 7) have provided only a positive answer but did not provide an explanation at all.

4.4. Conclusion after the questionnaire

As of the results of the questionnaire it is clearly seen and diagnosed that the current condition is alerting in both target groups and especially in the second group where students do not pay much of an attention of the proper pronunciation but only to the speaking as a manner to be understood.

4.5. Students' self-evaluation – Faculty of Philology

As for the students of Philology, this is a group of learners that are facing Phonetics and Phonology as a science for the very first time. Their response to the course was somewhat active as they were challenged to learn new matters and at the same time improve what they find as wrong and as a drawback from their previous learning. As from the interview all of them have stated that they find it difficult when making conversation to a foreign speaker, particularly with a native speaker of English. Besides of missing out the point when they listen the other speaker, they have noticed that are not being understood properly, especially when trying to explain matters that were purely almost directly translated from their native language into English. Therefore they also see that they are lacking in proper pronouncing of some English words. Especially if they do not pay much attention on [th] where they mix it with [s] etc.

4.6. Students' self-evaluation – Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics

As of the students of FTBL, this is a group of students that are familiar with the current required level of English level proficiency in order to be able to pass the exam. As from the interview all of them stated that they find it difficult when making conversation to a foreign speaker as well, particularly with a native speaker of English, but however feeling relieved if they get the chance to speak with a more insufficient speaker i.e. on their level. They also experience missing out the point when they listen to the other speaker, and they have noticed that are not being understood properly, especially when trying to explain matters that were purely almost directly translated from their native language into English. Once they are being understood, they have reached final goal.

4.7. Analysis of current textbooks- overview of the amount of materials designated to pronunciation

a. Textbooks and workbooks for Students of Philology:

As for the course of Phonetics and Phonology, it is a mandatory course at the Faculty of Philology and they attend it in the first and the second semester. According the curricula, they need to pass the material from the

first semester in order to be able to sit the test (attendance is permitted in the second semester to those who have not passed it). The study materials that are used for this course is Phonetics and Phonology by Boris Hlebec and additional to that is the Workbook for Phonetics and Phonology, by Biljana Cubrovic, which is in accordance with the textbook. Apart from these, there is an additional material that is used for dictations and some other types of reading and pronouncing exercises. The course is taught for 4 hours per week. The target group of students actually has passed the first semester of the course, not only by attending but with positive grades, in order to be introduced with the issues and the matters in a medium level.

b. Textbook and workbook for the students of Faculty of Tourism and Business Logistics:

The course of English for Specific Purposes- Business English Language is intended for the second group of participants of this research. Those are students that are majoring in Tourism and Business Logistics and have learned English as a foreign language in their secondary school. As for the research, the target group was the students from the second year of study which have already passed two semesters of Business English course. The textbook that is used for this course is Tourism 1- Oxford English for careers by Robin Walker and Keith Harding. As of the curricula, the course was scheduled for 4 hours per week. The textbook is consisted of 12 units, from unit 1 to 9 are scheduled for the first year of study, 4 units per semester.

4.8. Estimation of the pronunciation of the textbook for the second group of students (Business English)

Analyzing this textbook, it is clearly seen that each segment for learning a foreign language has been involved- Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing.

However, the part of the Speaking involves the pronunciation drills but it is not included in each unit. Particularly, those drills are involved in repetition of words consisting 'g' in spelling but differentiating it in words where it occurs as 'dʒ' and also practicing 'tʃ'.

5. Overall conclusion

As of the diagnosing the skills and competences of the students in both groups, particularly the second, from author's personal evaluation, the students are not generally poor or insufficiently skilled in English as a Foreign Language but moreover being poor in their pronunciation skills. Therefore, according to the textbook it is visible that each unit consist an insufficient amount of exercises of that type. Even though that it is an individual matter of one's ability to overcome or understand new study chapters/ materials etc. even more, an ability to imitate and receive a near-native level yet, it is clear that this target group is to be exposed and exploited to a further load of pronunciation practices in order to receive improvement. As of the conclusion it is highly desirable for the language teachers- especially those who particularly work on pronunciation in foreign language, to enrich the learning materials used in class, such as video, audio ICT etc. Also it is highly recommendable for them to use exercises that would help overcome pronunciation errors which should be in accordance with application of certain learning strategies, such as memory, cognitive, affective etc. which might also improve the fear of public speech, the initiative to take part in class discussions, hesitation to speak or participate in any conversation made in foreign language.

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